



State of Connecticut
GENERAL ASSEMBLY
Commission on Children



‘But I’m Just a Parent’

Parent Leadership Is About Democracy

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Parents are worried. They worry about who will take care of their children while they work. They worry over lost time, missed opportunities with their children, working one, two and sometimes three shifts to make a decent family wage.

They know the new economy requires new skills of their children. They often fear their children will not have a fair chance in the public schools. They know that gangs and drugs can compete with the family for children. They know that in some neighborhoods safety trumps all other cards for their young children.

But there is a critical gap between parents’ desire to improve conditions for children and their capacity to do it. They’re not indifferent or lazy. They simply lack a tool kit—a democracy tool kit to help them create changes in policy and leadership within a civic context. When the tools of democracy are understood, parents will reenter civic life.

As leaders in public policy and early care and education, it is our responsibility to reach parents and to help them reach us. Yet, it is not uncommon to hear providers complain that parents did not attend meetings that were paramount to family policy or education goals.

Parents no longer have the civic skills necessary to connect with government. Without the tools, they do not engage. Parents need dignity, access, social context, substantive roles, and a clear map of goals and child outcomes.

The frequent line, "But I’m just a parent," is often heard at meetings when parents are asked their opinions on a policy matter. The underpinning meaning is, "How can you ask me what I think? I am just a mother or father, I have no opinions." This sentence is the emblem of marginalization. It infers that parents are not a constituency and do not perceive themselves as consumers.

As language often teaches about culture, the sentence "But I'm just a parent," may tell us both about parent perception and self regard within a civic framework as well as where many within a

social policy have allowed parents to sit. The conundrum is basic. Parents are less involved because they are expected to be less involved.

Parent involvement in civic discourse is frequently a one-time event and often unintentionally token. People are concerned about engaging parents when they need parents as a constituency to effect a specific policy change.

Increasingly, federal legislation requires parent participation. Head Start, Even Start, Title 1 and other federal policies for young children's learning, position parents to be involved. These fine policy expectations of family involvement and parental decision making, are starting to be required in other policy domains. Federal as well as state law increasingly now require parents in the mix.

Head Start offers parent committees, parent involvement, parent evaluation, parent policies. There is an expectation of critical analysis, group interaction and multiple levels of involvement. Parents are taught to lead meetings, how the system they participate in works, who the players are, how to speak publicly. Parents are not just taught improved parenting skills, but specifically leadership capacity within an early childhood setting.

But the depth of parent involvement in programs such as Head Start is not always replicated in other programs. Most work nationally that is considered parent leadership is strictly parent education. When we minimize parenting to "just a parent" and teach improved parenting as the bridge to leadership, we are confusing unintentional messages of disempowerment with empowerment.

Sometimes parents are placed on boards to offer input. Usually there is only one parent and this parent is symbolic of the consumer. The parent comes infrequently and this becomes the measure of parent interest in the issue area. Board meetings are indeed important in that they determine the policy direction and overall goals of an institution. However, if the parent is not taught how a board works, how to behave within a board context, what public policy is, how it is created, the parent will not come with bounding enthusiasm or offer ideas.

Parents need to be treated as equal stakeholders in a public problem regarding family concerns. If not, the parent will usually feel quietly incompetent with few attachments to civic participation. Civics can no longer be presumed to be taught in the schools, religious institutions or public arenas where parents meet. What was once a high expectation of government and the public good, with clear understanding of how to interface with civic leaders, is now a low expectation with meager civic engagement. Parents are distanced from social change. They do not know how to effect the changes they deeply wish for their children and other children within neighborhoods, schools and communities.

The desire for change is strong. The capacity to change is modest. Parents need to learn how to lead. The outcomes of helping parents learn how to analyze civic issues, how to ask the right question, how to speak publicly are incrementally large. Skills learned can be replicated in many settings. Children watch their parents changing social and educational landscapes. Expectations of improvement are contagious. This is a different kind of parent education. It offers parents

hope, empowerment and the democracy skills necessary to reenter public life for the next generation.

It is this hope that offers children a deep and acquired sense that they can lead outside their homes in constructive, creative ways. Children begin to expect to visit city and town buildings of import. They are comfortable going with their parents to meetings. They begin to watch the news and sit with their parents while they read newspapers. The outside world pours in with meaning, opportunity and the expectation that each generation will make the world an even better place.

Specific democracy tools that are essential include:

- How government works;
- What public policy is;
- Understanding budgets and resource allocations;
- The role of different constituencies in making change for children;
- Ways to reach local, state and elected leaders;
- Voting, why it matters;
- How to use oneself as messenger in public dialogue;
- How to lead group discussions and cull ideas;
- Ways to empower community;
- Seeing neighborhood and groups as assets.

Parents also benefit from assessing their personal biases towards public life, power and change. If one has had difficult experiences at home or in public, with authority or with bias, one's faith in the possibility of civic involvement is often dimmed. Leadership is impeded by many potential caring parent advocates when previous negative experiences with authority have influenced their sense of leadership as dangerous or abusive. These experiences are often helpful to understand in order to facilitate constructive, potential leadership.

Methods of teaching these tools are modeled in curriculum emerging throughout the country. The Right Question Project in Boston teaches parents how to ask questions to deepen understanding and to effect change within a public context. The Parents Leadership Institute in Palo Alto, California teaches parents skills that empower them to strengthen family relationships and lead in their communities. The Parent Services Project offers leadership skills to parents within child care settings. The Parent Leadership Training Institute in Connecticut provides a 20-week democracy curriculum to bring parents back into the public sector.

Democracy programs for families create the enthusiasm that Walt Whitman spoke of when he wrote, "I Hear America Singing." Without democracy skills, there is a quiet whine and disappointment has opportunity to abound. When the tool kit is full of civic expectation there is the hammer, the drill and the song.

Elaine Zimmerman delivered this as a speech to the National Governors Association.